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SUBJECT: SLOVENIA: ROUNDTABLE ON ISLAM AND THE WEST FOSTERS
DISCUSSION OF RELIGIOUS COEXISTENCE AND NEED FOR TOLERANCE

11. (U) SUMMARY. On February 21, the Embassy and the University of Primorska co-organized a roundtable on "Islam and the West" at the newly open American Corner in Koper. With excellent organization provided by the University and exceptional attendance by Slovenian citizens, students, and the media, the roundtable generated a lively discussion of the need for religious tolerance and coexistence in Europe and beyond. Drawing on Slovenia's role as a crossroads of Western and Islamic civilizations, the participants underscored the distinctly European character of Balkan Islam and highlighted local traditions of coexistence and cross-pollination among religious faiths. Slovenia's best traditions of openness and intercultural understanding were put on display as a standing room only crowd discussed ways to promote a deeper dialogue among faiths. One American attendee wrote in an email to DCM: "Programs like these are what democracy and an open society are all about." The roundtable was covered by local print, radio, and TV outlets. The following day, DOS-funded speaker Stephen Schwartz gave a lecture at the University of Ljubljana and granted an exclusive interview to the print daily "Delo" on the subject of Islam's relationship to Western civilization. END SUMMARY.

Roundtable stimulates discussion of religious coexistence

12. (U) The roundtable was opened by DCM and Primorska University Rector, Dr. Lucija Cok. In her introductory remarks, DCM argued that Islamic traditions of compassion and mercy and Western principles of tolerance and freedom were in harmony, and debunked the thesis that a "clash of civilizations" between Islam and the West was inevitable. DCM also discussed the situation of Muslims living in the U.S., arguing that their religious values complemented their identity as American citizens and that they augmented the diversity of American society and culture.

13. (U) DOS-funded speaker Stephen Schwartz, Primorska University sociologist Dr. Anja Zalta, independent researcher Primoz Sterbenc, and Bosnian Cultural Center representative Admir Baltic participated in the actual roundtable, which was divided into two sessions. The first was titled "Southeastern Europe as a Crossroads of Islamic and Western civilization;" the second was titled "The future of Islam in Europe." All four participants stressed the fact that Islam was native to Europe, both in the Balkans and in Spain, and argued that the European character of Balkan Islam made it compatible with Western civilization. By highlighting the historic separation of mosque and state in Southeastern Europe, the speakers argued that Islamic and Western civilization had successfully adapted to each other

and could flourish together in the future.

14. (U) Schwartz criticized the negative role of Wahhabi fundamentalism and argued for the need to encourage pluralism within the Islamic world. Zalta noted that the Muslim world was not monolithic and that radical ideologies were often imported into Europe from abroad while local traditions were more tolerant. Sterbenc focused on the Bosnian war, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the Iraq war as focal points for Islamic political ideologies. Baltic argued that Bosnian Muslims had pioneered the "cohabitation" of Islam with a secular state and advocated a greater role for European-schooled imams in local Muslim communities.

15. (U) The audience of roughly 90-100 students and local citizens also included the Ambassadors of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary, Switzerland, and Romania, as well as the Turkish honorary consul and a German diplomat. Questions from the audience focused on Islamophobia in Europe and European Muslims' reaction to the rise of terrorism and extremist ideologies. One American attendee wrote in an email to DCM: "Programs like these are what democracy and an open society are all about. Please continue the good work."

16. (U) The roundtable was covered by local print, radio and TV outlets, including print daily Primorske Novice, Radio Koper, and TV Koper.

Schwartz lectures at University of Ljubljana

17. (U) On Wednesday, Schwartz spoke to a group of forty-five students from the International Relations faculty of the

LJUBLJANA 00000129 002 OF 002

University of Ljubljana. Schwartz spoke for half an hour on his personal story of becoming a Muslim, on the concept of the clash of civilizations and on Bosnia. He elaborated his theory of borderlands in which regions on the border of different cultures alternate between conflict and commerce. Bosnia, he stated, was in a position to take advantage of its position as a borderland state and to become the center of Islamic culture in Europe. In response to a question about the publication of cartoon images of the Prophet Mohammed, Schwartz argued that the images do not offend him as a Muslim and that, moreover, Islam does not forbid depictions of the Prophet. Schwartz told the students that 9/11 found the West unprepared to understand the nature of Islam, calling it a failure of imagination. Schwartz blamed the influence of Saudi oil money for co-opting Western academics and preventing a deeper examination of the dangers of Wahhabism. Students directed their questions towards the regional issues of Southeastern Europe asking Schwartz to comment on the status of Kosovo, the future of Bosnia and the role of Serbia in the region. Schwartz signed copies of his book, "Two Faces of Islam," for the students.

Comment

18. (SBU) With the recent controversy over the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed still gripping the media, post's roundtable on "Islam and the West" provided a timely discussion of the themes of religious tolerance, mutual understanding, and coexistence. The standing room only crowd of roughly 90-100 attendees and the participation of several Ambassadors made the event a tremendous success. The fact that this discussion was held in the American Corner, was inaugurated by DCM, and featured an American speaker, helped put the Embassy in the forefront of public diplomacy efforts to promote religious tolerance. Post will continue to look for creative ways to engage the Slovene

public on issues of tolerance, human rights, and respect for minority cultures.